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## THE BASIS OF PRESENT REFORM MOVEMENTS

In the discussion of modern political movements one fundamental question seems to evade answer,—“What determines the amount of time and attention which the people give to political affairs?” The growth of interest in the government of any organization, political or otherwise, is largely determined by other associations which are in a sense competitive. The city or state competes with the benevolent association, the business firm or corporation, the church, the family, the secret society, the club; hence the interest which a member of all these organizations can give to any one of them is largely a matter of addition and subtraction. We may estimate, provisionally at least, the relative importance of these various interests in the following order:

1. Business,
2. Family,
3. Church and religious societies,
4. Charitable and benevolent associations,
5. Social organizations, such as clubs,
6. Politics.

Our foreign critics are amazed and even confused by the absorption of the citizen in the first and second of these groups to the comparative exclusion of the others. The economic development of the United States has placed before the eyes of the people so many examples of men who became fabulously wealthy in a comparatively short time that our business ideals have been changed and the prospect of a thirty- or forty-year period of active work is no longer attractive. The frequently repeated statement that this is “the day of the young man” implies that the period of intense industrial activity is, for large classes of the community, undeniably shortening. As a result, during those years of a man’s life which are devoted to business, he withdraws more and more from participation not only in politics but in all other affairs. The proposition which politics puts before the business man is, “Shall I attempt to protect my interests by laborious effort at the polls or by arrangements made with the victorious candidate after election? Shall I work indirectly through the people or directly upon the elected official?” Much as we may lament the lack of interest shown by

the commercial and professional classes both in the conduct of elections and in the general management of party affairs, we may not disguise the fact that it costs less of time, annoyance and financial expenditure to accept the regular party candidates and make peace with them than to try to elect an independent set of representatives. Only those who have seen something of the inside workings of an independent movement can realize the immense waste of energy by friction, the loss of time and money and the endless wear and tear involved in the mere maintenance of such a movement in ordinary times. The history of most of these independent parties, even when they are successful, shows that the results are too often of the most trivial and evanescent character, entirely out of proportion to the expenditure involved. If these be the admitted facts, how can we blame the business man who asks for results and who judges reform movements by the reforms which they actually produce?

American absorption in business matters has long been a trite commonplace, but the peculiar influence of the family on political life has hardly been understood. Family selfishness, while not so reprehensible as the self-absorption of the individual, is only one degree less disastrous in its influence on political and social life. We have especially failed to appreciate the political dangers involved. In theory, the family spirit marks a step in advance over the pure egotism of the individual, but this step has already been taken by the lower animals. Doubtless a man's first duty to the community is to create, in the members of his own immediate family, right ideas and habits of conduct; this is admittedly the principal and most direct benefit which he can confer upon society, but the modern American is inclined to rest satisfied with this achievement. Ensconced in the comfort and safety of his home, he views with indifference the conflict between public and private interests raging without. So long as he and his are spared, the honest citizen does little more than record an occasional exclamation of disgust with the political ills of his time. Many interesting conjectures have arisen regarding the probable destruction of home life by the apartment house, the flat and the hotel; it is quite probable that such a change would have its effect in the strengthening of the other groups under discussion, but the movement has not yet progressed far enough to transform our domestic ideals to any

extent. That sharp distinction between private and public standards of action which so strongly impresses the foreign observer is largely a result of family selfishness. In Great Britain the domestic circle has been extended to include all the leading politicians and their friends in one great family clique; in the local governments a local family, composed of the landed gentry, exists, but in America politics is rigidly excluded from the home. Not only the citizens who tolerate public abuses, but the very politicians who are accused of planning and executing these misdeeds are usually men of unimpeachable home life. Let the man who is tempted to fulminate indiscriminate condemnation upon the dishonesty of politicians pause for a moment and ponder the private character and domestic relations of the political worker whom he knows; the conclusion will inevitably force itself upon him, not that public dishonesty is any less reprehensible but that it is apparently compatible with an almost ideal home relation. In exalting the family we have so ignored and neglected our political ideals as to lose all perspective of the proper relation of the two. Absorption in the affairs of the home is by no means confined to any class or stratum of society; it is a widespread and general characteristic of American life, which operates powerfully against all "outside" interests.

The group of activities centred about the church seems to be in a period of transition. Unlike the family spirit, this group differs widely in different classes of the people. In some, church affairs rank on a par with domestic interests; while in others the church is almost completely supplanted by charitable and social organizations. While the latter tendency is to some extent on the increase, as may be inferred from recent church statistics, yet a strong counter-tendency has set in. The methods of religious work are slowly improving, numerous organizations and societies are being established directly by ecclesiastical influence and perfected with the view of enlisting the layman and securing his active co-operation. The general increase of education and culture among the people at large, having robbed the pulpit of its monopoly of learning, has compelled the pastor or priest to rely less and less upon mere preaching and to emphasize his administrative ability in the management of church societies. There has not been a time for decades when so much stress was placed upon the activity of the laymen in all denominations. It would not be an exaggeration to say that if

the efforts now made bear reasonable results, the church will become an increasingly important competitor in the struggle for attention.

The group of interests designated as "charitable" includes a large number of associations founded upon sympathy or pity; in the general expansion of the humanitarian, altruistic motive the influence of these organizations grows ever stronger. There is in the very conditions of modern city life an increasing consciousness of social unity. Temporary aberrations of popular interest or misguided economic motives may for the time becloud this growing tendency, but it reasserts itself again with renewed vigor. The teaching of our entire educational system seems to strengthen such a development and it is therefore not surprising that organizations founded on the basis of human sympathy are taking a larger share of our attention year by year.

In the group of interests called "social" such as clubs and similar associations, while there is a considerable variation in different strata of society, yet the tendency toward mere entertainment is marked in all classes. Doubtless the nervous tension of city life increases the necessity for relaxation and incapacitates the individual for concentrated and sustained effort during leisure hours, thereby indirectly preventing active and effective participation in politics.

There remains for discussion the sixth group, which has purposely been placed last. Ought our political interests to compete with the other groups mentioned or should they harmonize and combine with these groups? Is politics an end in itself or simply a means to an end? To answer the last question first, our early political institutions, based largely on the paramount thought of political liberty, exalted politics to what now seems an unnatural position. The American Revolution, the establishment of a popular republic, the questions of political and civil rights which arose from this establishment and the great civil strife which finally settled most of these questions naturally elevated political discussion in such a way as to dominate the interests of Americans for nearly a century. We must also remember that in this period between 1787 and 1870 the means of communication between different parts of the country materially favored the supremacy of political over economic and other interests. The exciting character of political struggles has largely died out; the supremacy of the national government has been assured. The means of communication have improved so

greatly as to enrich the groups of interest represented by business, church and charitable associations at the expense of politics. The business man is no longer free from the competition of others situated at a distance of fifty miles as he formerly was. He must now enter an arena of competition which is frequently national or even international in its scope. This means a greater intensity of the groups of interest thus affected, while a corresponding intensity has not arisen to strengthen interest in our political questions; therefore, we find a gradual decadence of the old political supremacy over other organizations and politics is restored to its natural place as a means rather than an end. Politics can interest us in ordinary times only by espousing an issue from some one of the other groups. We only vote for a party which has identified itself with a certain business, charitable or social interest.

After reviewing these several groups of human interests and the various organizations founded upon them, the conclusion is irresistible, that no one man can do his part as a member in them all. The sentence, "*Important business is to be transacted and your presence is earnestly requested*" recurs more and more frequently on the meeting announcements of all organizations. We are infested with societies and associations, many of them formed in a light-hearted, off-hand manner by irresponsible persons. Let a strike occur and dozens of associations are founded to harmonize labor and capital; when peculiar conditions call attention to poverty new charitable societies are immediately floated; when anyone anywhere is suddenly impressed with the necessity for action along social lines he immediately organizes some national or international society to propagate the new idea. Such a mania for organizing or attempting to organize ambitious movements upon the slightest provocation would seem ludicrous were it not for the deep and lasting injury which is worked upon our association spirit. In consequence of this curious habit we have an astounding chaos of weakly agglomerations, all making frantic claims for public attention but none of them commanding the serious respect, much less the permanent efforts of intelligent people. Our associations are anæmic because of the physical impossibility of securing sufficient interest to manage them. Doubtless this incoherent mass of sickly organizations will be superseded in time by a better co-ordinated and federated union. In the meantime we have imbibed almost a

contempt for societies in general. The modern American is pleased apparently to belong to many but to work in few or none; in recent years this fact has made itself apparent even in business associations. It is inevitable that such a tendency should have its effect on politics in an apathetic disregard of the rights and duties both of membership and citizenship.

When we examine the new political movements of the present time we find that they may be classified either as reform movements or as distinctly progressive tendencies. While reforms, in the stricter sense of the term, aim at the *restoration* of former ideals of government, progressive movements tend rather toward the solution of new problems. Our modern reforms appear to contemplate either a change in the mechanism of governmental structure, such as the ballot, the nominating procedure, the referendum, the registration of voters, proportional representation, etc., or a simple change in the personnel of the existing government. Some apparently include both of these, but they will usually be found to emphasize one more or less to the neglect of the other. The first species of reform movement depends upon a mechanical device for the abolition of some grave abuse or for the introduction of some new contrivance which will minimize the action of the boss. These reforms are nearly all directed towards the repair of our system of representation. It is contended that the system is in the main good, but that a certain feature requires alteration in order to insure greater accuracy of representation or to bring the action of our representatives into harmony with the will of the people. This may be called the "contrivance" theory of government. It appeals especially to the young man and to the newer sections of the country. If something is wrong let the government right it; if the primaries of our great political parties are subject to abuse, let the government regulate them; if the political minority of the people is neglected by the majority, let the government establish a system of minority or proportional representation; if abuses in our elections have crept in through the publicity of the ballot or through false and fictitious names placed on the list of voters, let the government establish a secret ballot or a system of personal registration; if, after all these precautions are taken, the laws passed by the legislature do not correspond to the will of the people, then let the government provide for a referendum or popular vote, which shall approve or reject

the laws of which complaint is made. In all of these mechanical reforms there is an optimistic strain which is not without its element of pathos. We are a buoyant, hopeful, and withal, a labor-saving people, yet in our search for an "invention" which will automatically produce political happiness we find ourselves disappointed at each successive step. The necessity for such a school of thought is evident. All governments have a tendency to stagnation and ritualism which can only be overcome by constant effort. The mechanical repair of a government is just as needful as the application of a lubricant—if such a term may be used. The American system in particular has begun to show evidences of this need; the great speed at which our economic conditions are carrying us has taken the governmental machinery farther and farther away from the old model and, while the mechanical reformer will always be accused of tinkering, it is exactly tinkering which is required. But is there no end to the number of mechanical changes in government designed to secure a perfect system? Is there any one device or trick which will accomplish the results claimed by its advocates? Is government wholly or even principally a matter of machinery?

America is yet in an early stage of economic development and until a considerable amount of industrial stagnation has arisen, until well-defined conflicts of class interest are formed, it will be difficult to find a favorable opportunity for structural changes in our system.

Those who believe in a change of personnel are convinced that our political inconveniences are the result of dishonesty and corruption; hence the plea is for an honest man. This latter class represents a distinctly Anglo-Saxon skepticism with regard to new governmental inventions. It is maintained, not without reason, that there are certain things which the people must do for themselves. Emphasis is laid on the moral obligation of the people to choose better men.

In considering the lack of results attending our moral and mechanical reform movements, a second query presents itself,—“To what extent do the peculiar methods employed by reformers contribute to the already existing apathy?” Even the most enthusiastic advocate of political change must admit that in recent years certain tendencies have developed which materially impede the progress of such movements. The first of these is the trend toward purely negative criticism. It is noticeable that reform movements are



most frequent in the large cities; the corrupt use of the city's franchises, the methods of awarding municipal contracts, and the relations of the police department to certain "vested interests" hostile to public morality, are the storm centres of reform. In franchises and contracts particularly we have the very essence of contention between the reformer and the regular party organization. That small group of men which in every city disposes of these franchises and contracts possesses one advantage which can hardly be overestimated,—the knowledge that the public cannot wait. The great municipal improvements, which are always contemplated or in process of execution in a modern city, appeal to the popular imagination in a very definite way. The people can appreciate a plan for a subway, a new gas supply, a new system of parks, even when they cannot grasp the more abstract reasoning against private ownership, or in favor of a certain method of construction. The regular party enjoys the strategic benefits of proposing a definite improvement in city life, while the reformer is too often placed in the position of a critic of the proposed plan. This attitude of criticism is a primary source of reform weakness and instability. While at irregular intervals the people may be willing to adopt a purely negative or destructive program, yet in the general run of politics they can be courted only by positive proposals. There is no cause for complaint in this; the human mind is enraptured by action, not by abstention. The great religions of the world, with the possible exception of Buddhism, are essentially positive. The permanent political achievements of our history have been largely of this character, the movements which resulted in Magna Charta, the parliamentary constitutions, the Declaration of Independence and the extension of the suffrage have all been proposals that something be done. As such they have appealed to the natural love of action of the temperate zone peoples. Is it strange that the reformer, in so far as he departs from the psychological basis, should encounter apathy?

Closely allied to this negative tendency, and perhaps forming a part of it, is the fondness for denunciation shown by those who advocate public honesty. Doubtless under the peculiar circumstances of the times in which a Danton, a Burke, or a Patrick Henry carried on his campaign of destructive oratory, the abuses of the day rightly merited all the bitter invective, the stinging sarcasm and the fiery denunciation which were so courageously uttered by these

great apostles of reform. The consensus of opinion among more modern reformers seems to favor similar tactics, but is the present a time for invective? Are our political mistakes always, or even usually, to be righted by an appeal to popular indignation? Can the wrath of the people solve the problem of corporation control for the national government, of factory legislation for the state, or of tenement house conditions for the municipality? Are these not tangled problems fraught with complexity and do they not require the patient, intelligent efforts of the people for a decade or a generation rather than the passionate outbreak of a moment?

The capacity for indignation may vary with men as with communities, but it always has its limits. Popular indignation is not a steadily burning fire upon which a system of government may be calculated; it is rather a destructive lightning flash. The victim may afterward prove guilty or innocent, but a victim there must be. After the storm has passed over and men have turned their attention to other things, the casual observer may well wonder at the insignificance of the result. Government by indignation is the rule of blind anger, a species of political lynch law, in which the mob is composed of the erstwhile conservative classes. So long as we depend on the spurts and explosions of popular passion for our political motive power we may be assured that mere spasmodic political virtue will continue. Doubtless there will always be governmental evils to excite the righteous indignation of the honest man, but to those who value continuous progress, it seems far more important to offer some positive solution of economic and social problems immediately confronting us than to concentrate our attention wholly upon the defects in our government.

A second important cause of the weakness of reform movements is the notion that civic spirit is to be stimulated indefinitely by simple appeals to patriotism and sense of duty. There is a well-known law in physiology as in psychology that the excitement due to a stimulant does not increase steadily in proportion to the dose. Whether it be an application of alcohol or of reform, the period of stimulation soon reaches a maximum beyond which successive doses merely produce stupor. It is a wise reformer who knows when his patients have reached the maximum point of excitement. Unfortunately the analogy goes farther. Taken not only at a given moment or in a single campaign but over a number of years, the consumer of political

alcohol finds that his system is less and less exhilarated by the accustomed stimulant. Yet our political reformers rely upon the appeal to duty or to indignation as their principal excitant.

A third interesting feature of reform agitation is the comparative delay in resorting to personal work. The distinguishing feature of the newest efforts along religious lines is the emphasis placed on the work of the individual with the individual. The success of the machine in politics does not consist to any important degree in the mass meeting or the lecture, but in the quiet study of the individual, in the conversation between two men and in giving each man what he wants. Curiously enough, the forces which have been marshaled to secure honest government have been among the last to adopt this method. The impressions received in a mass meeting are transitory and indefinite. The enthusiasm generated by an address to a large body of men is soon crowded out by the more pointed and continuous operation of other interests. The forces of reform are only beginning to realize that their permanent existence must be founded upon the division worker rather than upon the moral lecturer. The frantic appeal must be superseded by the *tête à tête*.

In the next place the idea of a reform as a restoration should be immediately abandoned. Our independent political movements are not only negative but they are too often historical, or even antiquarian, in their trend. The argument that we should restore our government to its pristine state under the old conditions is one which may, and usually does, produce a salvo of applause, but it cannot sustain the action of the individual through long periods of active effort. Deep down in our inmost consciousness we are convinced of the fact that the old government was for the old conditions and that new circumstances require new methods. Against this deep-rooted conviction the reformer battles in vain. With all our reluctance to accept new theories the logic of the situation is slowly but surely making headway. Our reverence for the past is not less but our present need is greater. The practical sense of the people will not allow them to hesitate long in the choice between a restoration and a renovation. Another suggestion which may be hazarded is the need of a co-ordinating program of mechanical reforms. Attention has already been called to the waste of effort involved in the multiplication of separate and distinct societies with

similar ends, the same holds good of the efforts toward the betterment of our political constitution. If all the societies which are now endeavoring to secure the adoption of constitutional amendments, national, state and local, looking toward the mere structural repair of our governments,—such as the referendum, the compulsory vote, the direct primary, the alphabetically arranged ballot, the civil service, proportional representation, etc.,—could be federated into one great combination, if they could arrange definitely for a consistent order in which these changes should be urged upon the people and thereupon concentrate all their energy on the execution of the program, it can hardly be doubted that great and material progress might be achieved. Innumerable difficulties stand in the way of such a combination, but the movement once begun would doubtless commend itself to a majority of those concerned.

Lastly, the reform temperament seems to rely much upon the hypothesis that political improvements are to come principally or even wholly from the respectable middle class. This class forms a highly important factor in politics, but it is hardly the element from which great changes may be expected. If we divide society into four great sections, including the leisure classes, the active industrial and commercial capitalists, the middle class and the laborers, in the narrower sense of the term, it will be seen from what has already been said that the class here designated as active capitalists cannot afford to mingle extensively in political work beyond that immediately required for their most pressing business interests. The leisure class may also be discarded so far as political activity is concerned. While this section of the people furnishes in England a large majority of the political leaders of the nation, it has thus far in America shown no signs of a similar development. The long-continued traditions which in England have led the leisure class, that is the landed gentry, into politics and insured them the respect of the people have not been developed in this country. It may even be doubted whether the new industrial aristocracy of Great Britain will in the long run be able to maintain the high standard and traditions of the old landed gentry as against the more boisterous demands of the people.

How is it with the American middle class? The great mass of professional men, farmers, storekeepers, clerks and small business men are loosely classified in this group. The presence or absence of

political motives leading such a conglomerate mass towards action or apathy must necessarily vary with the individual occupations, but judged from the standpoint of independent political movements or reform parties, it must be admitted that their interest in recent years has not shown any marked increase. Is there reason to believe that the laborers are more interested in progressive or radical movements? The increase of the socialist vote in recent elections seems to warrant an affirmative answer. While the laborer has not uniformly been a strenuous advocate of reform movements, this is doubtless due to the existing impression that distinctive labor interests were not subserved by such movements. If the laboring class is not to be organized as a separate political party,—an event which is dreaded by many conservative Americans,—then our other political parties, regular and independent, must espouse more and more of the issues which distinctly interest this class. In municipal politics, for example, it will no longer suffice to offer a merely moral or pseudo-moral program, “turn the rascals out,” such as has been displayed before the people for generations, but a positive proposal of definite civic improvements must be made, such as greater opportunities for decent recreation, a purer and more abundant water supply, improved housing accommodations, a reduction in the hours of labor in certain occupations, better and cheaper transportation, etc. These improvements would benefit all classes, but they especially interest the workingman. While such vital needs are being neglected, can we expect the immense vote of this class to be swayed by considerations of mere respectability in government? Hitherto the proposal of such changes has been greeted with cries of “Socialism!” but Socialism has ceased to be a threat. The mere fact that certain of these proposals are parts of the general Socialistic plan will not of itself condemn them.

In the growing demand for the solution of these problems a curious and comparatively unfamiliar feature of our politics is being developed. The executive power is insidiously acquiring a complete mastery over the government. Our collective legislatures by reason of their numbers have escaped almost completely from popular control and the people are therefore turning, as with one accord, toward the executive. In response to this changed attitude toward one who was formerly feared as a tyrant, the executive department has suddenly begun to take on increased powers. The

president, the governor, the mayor, justifying themselves upon the popular demand for action and popular distrust of the legislative assemblies, have reached out in all directions until the safeguards and restrictions placed on executive power after our struggle with the English Crown have been nullified and within the space of two decades our national, state and city administrators have reabsorbed most of the real powers wielded by the kings and sheriffs of old. Let any one converse with his neighbor on politics and it will at once be seen that the views expressed about Congress, the state legislature or the city councils are vague and distrustful. They become definite and pointed the moment attention is turned to the executive. Many of our political notions have been carried over from the time when few questions were debated in minutest detail by village folk, cut off from communication with the outside world for days or even weeks at a time, and forced to search for new topics of conversation. Under such a régime of life the pros and cons of public policy were necessarily developed in detail. The political system thus reared on abundant meditation and reflection was doubtless a good one, but it can exist to-day only in the remotest hamlets of civilization. Political questions are now presented to us in the midst of a superficial glance over the morning paper. Occasionally our foreign relations are considered worthy of remark or even extended discussion, but in the main the political question which aspires to secure our attention must be pointed and definite, must be capable of being answered by "yes" or "no," "Robinson" or "Smith." Now in choosing "Robinson" or "Smith" we exhaust our stock of elective energy, we accept the other men who are on the ticket and thereby we neglect all but the head of the executive government. In so doing we have changed the substance of our government, but, instead of reviving, as has been claimed, the old despotic abuses, we have grasped the only agency for securing the adoption of those real economic and social benefits which are of such vital importance under present conditions. The more we concentrate attention on the executive official, the easier it becomes to secure the activity of the hitherto apathetic class of the community, the simpler and more direct will be our political needs. It is, therefore, a matter for congratulation, rather than criticism, that at the precise moment when political affairs are suffering the keenest competition in the struggle for the attention of the citizen, the natural development of the execu-

tive power should begin to give an added point of definiteness to political action.

To summarize this attempted contrast between reforms and progressive movements, it may be said, *first*, that American politics though originally exalted in the minds of the people to an independent interest or group of interests, has now resumed a more natural condition as a mere means of promoting other interests; *second*, the forms of the old political system are still retained, but are incapable of application or successful operation because of the growing absorption not only in business but especially in the family, whereby the fund of interest in politics is almost entirely depleted; *third*, the efforts of reformers are aimed either directly at the establishment of a more honest personnel of government or at the structural improvement of our system by means of new political contrivances; *fourth*, the problems now demanding political treatment are hardly susceptible of solution by purely mechanical contrivances in government, by denunciation, by fiery outbreaks of popular wrath or by a return to primitive conditions of politics; *fifth*, these new issues demand open recognition from the existing parties or from new political organizations in which the labor class may be expected to play a much more important part; *sixth*, the growth of executive power in government has taken place largely in response to the new demands and has quietly but none the less effectively changed the real workings of our system.

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